

Approaching and Taking Birds from Nesting Colonies

Standard Operating Procedures

Jun 21, 2010

Disturbances in and around bird nesting colonies largely fall into one of the following four categories: SCAT teams, cleanup crews, NRDA/studies, and low level over-flights by reconnaissance crews and media/VIP tours. The latter impact should be alleviated with guidance that all flights over colonies should be more than 500 feet in height and minimized in number.

A basic tenet to embrace is to be responsive and sensitive to the needs of these groups (e.g. NRDA's desire to document each injury), while maximizing the likelihood of long-term bird survival. A mantra to be mindful is to, "not do more harm in the name of doing good." The guidance below should be used to direct the work of SCAT teams, cleanup crews, and NRDA/studies approaching bird nesting colonies by boat and/or on foot.

Potential impacts of human entry include young suffering from heat as parents are not there to shade them; eggs and young may be dislodged from the parent nest and also adjacent nests as adult birds attempt to flee; and older chicks will leave the nest to avoid potential predation. In an undisturbed state, adults are careful to not kick eggs and young out of the nest. When disturbed and departing in a panicked state, adults will often kick eggs and young out of their own nest and will often disturb other nests in their frantic efforts to get airborne.

When no oil is seen in and clearly around a colony, we will not enter colonies for any reason (especially important to note that there should be no exceptions for SCAT teams and cleanup crews). When observing for oil potentially impacting a colony, observations should be made at an acceptable distance from the colony to avoid disturbance (consult local land manager and /or appropriate State wildlife agency personnel) while also determining if any adults or large chicks are showing signs of being exposed to oil. If oil is detected on multiple birds within the colony, consult the local land manager or appropriate State wildlife agency personnel to determine when it might be appropriate to enter the colony to recover chicks or adults. Given the high rate of natural mortality of young and the concern of not doing more harm than good, as a standard guideline birds should not be recovered from a colony when less than 33% of chicks and adult birds are visibly oiled, but when over 33% serious discussions should be underway with the local land manager and/or appropriate State wildlife agency personnel to determine what level of oiling justifies the disturbance necessary to recover oiled birds.

If a decision to recover birds is made, we must carefully consider the time of day (morning almost always best), stage of nesting (older chicks more likely to survive), number of personnel (need ample staff), time spent in the colony (be quick and efficient), etc. to minimize disturbance and potential injury.

It is important to register information about each colony in a GIS so that as staff rotates through assignment, important location and status details are not lost, so disturbance can be minimized. That said, it should be recognized that habitat conditions can change from non-oiled to oiled in a matter of hours. Aerial recon missions at appropriate heights are indeed a critical function in this process.